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JOHN, VISCOUNT MORLEY, ON LUCRETIVUS¹

I took it into my head that I might do worse than give a day or two to reviving memories of Lucretius, the ancient poet who fits in so closely with leading thoughts, and contests of thought, in our present day, to say nothing of Helvetius, d'Holbach, and others, on whom I had exercised mind and pen of old. It evidently matters much what book, prose or verse, lays hold of a man and of what book he happens, by temperament, teaching, training, or accident to lay hold. *The Nature of Things* can hardly be called a book to live with, but it is full of grandeur, sympathetic feeling, sublime sonorous music, that a reader may be glad and all the better for having near him. Lucretius like Macchiavelli is one of the great figures in literature who have gone through long spells of what is called immortality, bearing all the time a bad name. Singular is his story. His life was "invisible and dim". His one poem was never completed. Its duration hung upon a single manuscript. The manuscript appeared and disappeared for successive centuries. Whether his influence persisted in traces obscure and rare through the theologies and philosophies of the Middle Ages, scholars earnestly dispute. Some contend that in influence he was only second to Aristotle, and in continuous popularity only second to Virgil. Poet, savant, philosopher, he claims a place in three spheres. Nobody, I should think, reads his poem literally through. Mommsen finds Lucretius as savant absolutely unreadable. Others measure the poet, and insist that if you take a round figure for what you have a right to call poetry, you come to no more than 1800 lines out of 7400. More fastidious persons will have it there are only 700 really fine or memorable lines in the whole six books. About numbers this quarrel, like so many if not most quarrels of taste, is trivial. Even those who firmly choose to skip three-quarters still are conscious of the sound of a voice that is sublime, and the might of an imagination that soars on triumphant pinions beyond the flaming ramparts of the world. Whatever definition of poetry we may borrow from the poets themselves—whether "a speaking picture" or "invective" (Johnson) or "articulate music" (Dryden)—the tense,

¹In 1917, John, Viscount Morley, as the title page describes him, published a work, in two volumes, entitled *Recollections* (New York, Macmillan, 1917). Book IV, Chapter V (= 2.113-130), is entitled *An Easter Digression*. The chapter describes a holiday, which at Easter time, in 1905, Viscount Morley spent in his library. The matters considered in pages 113-117 are of no special interest to a classical scholar. But the discussion of Lucretius, 118-130, is of great interest, not only in itself, but also because of certain well known facts in the intellectual life of Viscount Morley. Since the discussion is, besides, not likely to be easily accessible, it seems well worth while to reproduce it here.

C. K.

defiant, concentrated, scornful, fervid, daring, and majestic verse of Lucretius is unique and his own.

It is not hard to see why he should have had this bad name. He was vehemently unorthodox on sacred fundamentals—a pagan, without religion, or the feeling for it. This last is what mankind are slowest to forgive. It is curious that, as I think, Dante finds no place for Lucretius in any of his three spheres of the other world, Inferno, Purgatory, or Paradise. Again, to readers who did not go much below the surface, he was what in our days is loosely, and somewhat promiscuously, labelled Pessimist. Pessimism—which, let us recollect, is a very different thing from misanthropy—has many a shape, and voices beyond counting. A learned Grecian of our time has assured us that Aeschylus, though a strictly religious pagan, like Pindar, may well be called a pessimist, nay, "the very patriarch and first preacher of pessimism", and of this the Grecian finds his illustration in Prometheus, who redeems men from the low estate into which they were born, instructs them in all art and knowledge to lift them up from their sorry plight, discovers without disparagement or blame that they listen without hearing, and in the end is repaid by cruel exile in iron chains upon the frosty Caucasus. However this may be, pessimism ranges from the passionate laments of Israel; the clear-eyed melancholy of the Greek; the savage and unholy imaginations of the man like Swift, who on his birthday ever read Job's third chapter; the crystall lustre of Leopardi's unchangeable despair and lacerating irony; the transitory effusions of German *Wellschmerz*, or the effronteries of Zarathustra. Lucretius stands alone in the controversial force with which the genius of negation inspires him, and transforms into sublime reasons for firm act, so long as living breath is ours, the thought that the life of a man is no more than a dream of a shadow, the generation of men no more than the generation of leaves, putting forth to air and sky, then scattered by autumn winds to earth.

His philosophy was borrowed from a Greek, but Lucretius was Roman, and the furious havoc of Rome in his day may well have awakened in him energetic thought on the problems of the world, such as may happen even to men with none of his commanding genius in any age, ancient or our own, who have the misfortune to be brought into sight of the like ruin of distracted States and insensate men.

Among the most singular of those who have tried their hands at turning Lucretius into English must be counted the wife of the famous puritan, Colonel Hutchinson. She turned him into verse, she says, out

of youthful curiosity to understand things she heard so much discourse of at second-hand. In time the admirable woman grew to be as angry with Lucretius as if he had been an episcopalian royalist, with his "foppish casual dance of atoms", and the other senseless superstitions.

Later than Jeremy Taylor a verse translation by a writer, now unknown for other things, was printed by Creech in 1682, and went through many editions. Then the task fell by way of experiment into mightier hands. Having, with much ado, got clear of Virgil, Dryden undertook some pieces of Lucretius, in whom he found as his distinguishing character a certain kind of noble pride. Our untold debt to Dryden as the most splendid master of English prose, can by no means content us with the verse into which he Englished some of the finest lines in poetry:

'Tis pleasant safely to behold from shore
The rolling ship and hear the tempest roar. . . .

And so forth, in a style that had no note of either the vigour or the music of its original.

Crossing a long tract of time, from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth, we still find English and French poets coming on to Lucretian ground. The most popular English poet of our Gladstonian era perhaps did not make the worthiest choice when he tacked his lofty, solemn, powerful verses called *Lucretius* on to a repellent, and not well-supported, myth about an amatory potion.

Sully-Prudhomme was a zealous Lucretian, in the respectable conviction that

Pour dissiper l'horreur de notre nuit profonde,
Le soleil ne peut rien, ni le jour éclatant,
Mais la Nature parle et la Raison l'entend!

He even began a translation, but was not sorry to find himself anticipated by what he felt bound to regard as the definite version of Lefevre (1876). Nor can an English ear be sorry either, for somehow the great open diapason of the Lucretian hexameter is grievously missing in this effort of a poet of proved grace and modern elegance.

Still stranger is it to find Lucretius invoked as his partner in devotion to the philosophic ruse by Lamartine—that singular and winning genius, who was not only a poet, but, as competent French critics say, the very spirit of poetry itself; and who besides his poetry, by way of passing episode, overturned a throne by a book—a book of which the most potent contemporary novelist wittily said that it raised history to the level of fiction. . . . Lamartine courageously risked his life in victorious encounters with the Paris mob in 1848; he fascinated, persuaded, overwhelmed, ruled them in some of their stormiest hours. "Physical nature", <Lamartine> said, "was the theme of Lucretius; moral nature is mine". Far indeed is the journey from Lamartine's delicate faculty in gifts of poetic beauty to the Roman poet's unsparing wrestle with false divinities, misjudged destinies, a universe of desolating law. Yet

in both of them glowed the like vivid sympathies of soul.

Macaulay does justice to Lucretius's general poetic strength and elevation, even placing him before Virgil among the wearers of poetic crowns, but he despatches the philosophy as, for the most part, utterly worthless. This comes to much the same as Mommsen's verdict that Lucretius, dealing with atoms and void and the rest of his science, is unreadable. Most such verdicts rather miss the mark of history. The scientific theories were unverified, as they were bound to be, and so the philosophy associated with them was but the shadow of a system with no clear root in sound method. Yet the aerial labour of his imagination brought him marvelously far on the path towards the mountain heights of modern speculation. The world in which we live, and all the business of the elements, has become a sounding house of vast general laws. Of these laws it is the nature of things to be their subject. They are no sport of arbitrary, changeful, and capricious deities. Far distant, aloof, remote, dwell those divine beings. The doctrines of the Atom, again, the doctrines of special affinities, leave their traces after many centuries in the prevailing guesses of our present time upon the constitution of matter. Then in fine comes the great key-note from which we started. The relations of body and soul, the poet argues, well considered in all their analogies and phenomena in the universe of sentient being, bid us shake ourselves free from that terror of death, and the mysterious dread of the continuity of conscious individual life in an unknown hereafter, which so darkly overshadows, distracts, and paralyses the life of "momentary man". Of all the countless host of poets, preachers, philosophers, and theologians who, with every variety of aspect and approach, have held, by way either of promise to the good or menace to the bad, that all philosophy of life is in essence *commentatio mortis*, Lucretius is most strenuous, lofty, and insistent on enforcing the sombre lesson taught by the ancient Hebrew long ages before him: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest".

It was impossible that our own glorious literature should not contain, in prose and verse alike, a thousand things of superlative beauty about this universal theme, from Raleigh's "*O eloquent, just and mighty death*", or the thrilling dialogues in Claudio's prison, down to the most melting and melodious single verse in all the exercises of our English tongue, "*After life's fitful fever he sleeps well*", the tender summary of it all. Still, the famous passage of Lucretius at the close of his third book <3.894-899> is of such quality that I hardly find it in my heart to quarrel with the accomplished critic of to-day who suggests that "its lofty passion, its piercing tenderness, the stately roll of its cadences, is perhaps unmatched in human speech". . . .

Then there is the half of the fifth book which Monro pronounces unsurpassed, if not unequalled, in all Latin

poetry for varied beauty, earnest satire, and sublimity.

Critics have complained of *Paradise Lost* that Milton has taken a scheme of life for life itself. Of Lucretius at least this is not true. Though his own days are "invisible and dim", his poem is rich and glowing in the essence and spirit of the life of the world in itself. His gospel is a gospel of active energy and of sympathy all through the world of sentient being. I have already copied a short piece of Montaigne's, and there is a touch of the same feeling in Lucretius's thought of the aged ploughman after the ease and fruitfulness of earth's golden days have passed away—how the husbandman shakes his head and with deep sigh thinks that the labour of his hands comes to so little; how we wear out the strength of labouring men and their oxen. We do not know what Lucretius would have made of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, but Freedom, Justice, Pity is no bad battle-cry, and it is Lucretian. We may well be as indifferent as we like about atom and void, but it is pleasant to read of "light-sleeping dogs with faithful hearts in their breasts, and woolly flocks, and beasts of burden whom we protect and feed in requital of their useful services". Or the picture of the Molossian hounds, "when they essay fondly to lick their whelps with their tongue, or toss them with their feet, and snapping at them make a feint with lightly closing teeth of swallowing, though with gentle forbearance they caress them with a yelping sound greatly different from that which they utter when left alone in a house they bay, or when they shrink away with a crouching body howling from blows".

The place of death in Lucretius naturally brings a reader, with good authors at his elbow, to Lessing's *Laocoon*—"dear Lessing", as George Eliot called him—one of the rare books that, like Grotius or Adam Smith, startled the world by a sudden shaft of new light diffusing itself over changed tracts of thought for all time to come. Though first suggested to him by Burke's *Sublime and Beautiful*, of which Lessing made himself translator, it was a fruitful surprise in the originality of its contribution to the philosophy of art, and the conditions of poetry and painting. Not any less remarkable, and it brings him involuntarily into line with Lucretius, is the little tract with which he shortly followed *Laocoon*, on the images of death in ancient art—a plea against the notion that to the classic world the symbol of death took the repulsive shape of the skeleton, the Arch Fear in a visible form. Goethe records how, in his youth, they were all enchanted with the beauty of the thought that the ancients represented Death as the brother of Sleep, each in form the semblance of the other, twin brothers in the arms of Night. The enchantment was not universal, for in common faith death is the penalty of Sin; hence it was natural to symbolize it by a terrifying image. Lessing's reply was that the Christian faith has not revealed this dreadful truth in order to make us despair,

but promises a blessed end to devout resignation and contrition of heart. The Scripture itself, moreover, he goes on, speaks of the Angel of Death: why should not the artist give up the hateful skeleton, and put us in possession of the better image of an angel? "Only religion misconceived can draw us away from the beautiful, and it is an evidence for the true religion properly understood, the more it everywhere restores us to beauty". Whether or not he accurately divined all the transformations and conclusions by which the skeleton came to be taken for the image of death, Lessing was felt to have carried his law of beauty into supreme heights of art and life. In those days, sang Schiller in *Die Götter Griechenlands*, "no grisly skeleton entered the chamber, and stood before the deathbed". So, in short, the skeleton was displaced on the funereal monument by a gracious genie bearing in all simplicity a reversed torch or some symbol of the resurrection.

To nobody, we might well have supposed, was the spirit of Lucretius so little congenial as it was to Goethe, the stormiest of poets to the most composed. Yet, as it appears, when Goethe came back from his travels in Italy, he was full-blown pagan, and was not slow to express high thoughts of *The Nature of Things*. For some twenty years he encouraged its first translation into German (1820), and even took an active share in the task. Vitally different as the vast march of time had made them, the two stand out, each of them a grand compound of poetry, scientific aim, and practical philosophy. Goethe applauds Lucretius as a diligent observer and explorer of nature, as master of strange powers of living delineation of nature's phenomena. All these, joined to an amazing elevation of mind and speech, assured his immortality as man, Roman, philosopher, and poet all in one. His book, says Goethe, who does not often show much care for historic values, is one of the most remarkable documents in the world, because it shows how men thought and felt on the secrets of the universe between the sixth and eighth decades before the Christian era.

It is interesting to note how in the latest hours at which the Christian era has yet arrived, Lucretius is still a living combatant as he was in the pagan era. The most brilliant English apologist of our day, I should think, has been Martineau, and when the apologist comes to deal with the "great mountain-chain of death", and life to come, it is to the rolling hexameters from Lucretius he goes for adverse texts that he made it his business to overthrow. Goethe himself, so widely counted "Europe's sagest head", may well be said to be the founder, guide, and oracle of an informal, nameless, and unorganized communion of his own—men and women content to live their lives independently of two articles of such profound and saturating belief as those against which Lucretius wages his impassioned war. Some would say the Greeks found it all out long before either Roman or German, and end the matter in some plangent lines in a fragment of Euripides. . . .

Earth the most great, and Heaven on high!
 Father is He to man and god;
 And She, who taketh to her sod
 The cloud-flung rivers of the Sky

And beareth offspring, men and grass
 And beasts in all their kinds, indeed
 Mother of All. And every seed
 Earth-gendered back to Earth shall pass,
 And back to Heaven the seeds of Sky;
 Seeing all things into all may range
 And, sundering, show new shapes of change,
 But never that which is shall die.

GILBERT MURRAY.

Or the better known lines:

I hold him happiest
 Who, before going quickly whence he came,
 Hath looked ungrieving on these majesties,
 The world-wide Sun, the stars, water and clouds
 And fire. Live, Parmeno, a hundred years,
 Or a few weeks, these thou wilt always see,
 And never, never, any greater things.

Ibid.

This is Menander. For him Goethe had the liveliest admiration. He calls him pure, noble, cheerful, altogether invaluable, even though unhappily but a fragment. Yet if one demands an antistrophe to this strophe of Menander, I can think of none more apt than Goethe's own famous and beautiful psalm of life, known as *Das Göttliche*. From a very different point of view Browning's readers will not forget his sombre lines under the title "Prospice".

THE LONELY WORD IN VERGIL

"All the charm of all the Muses often flowering in a lonely word". Thus has Tennyson described one of the most notable qualities of Vergil's style. On one occasion Tennyson was asked to give an example of what he meant by the "lonely word", and he replied that *cunctantem*, Aen. 6.211, illustrated what he intended when he wrote his famous line. It is interesting to note that this very word has been criticized by more than one editor as "unfortunate", in view of the fact that Vergil has already told us that the golden branch would readily follow Aeneas's grasp if he was called by the Fates. The editors have been too literal-minded. Tennyson saw something beyond the face value of the word. To Aeneas in the excitement of the great moment there seemed delay where none existed. Because of what the poet has told us above the word gains increased significance in the portrayal of Aeneas's eagerness, and the contrast in the literal phrases really helps rather than hinders the thought.

Vergil's inimitable style was due largely to his capacity for making words carry more than their face value. In the powers of suggestiveness his words express ideas and emotions more effectively than if he had used words mathematically equivalent to the several ideas. This trait may be called indirectness, condensation, or suggestion, but the essential thing is

that the poet, discerning that the truth is often more eloquently expressed by an appeal to the imagination than by an appeal to the intellect, and finding that the ordinary symbols are inadequate for this purpose, therefore employ words which transcend their ordinary functions. The added meaning may be due largely to the situation created by the poet. Though the story of the sufferings of Troy fills an entire book, it is brief (the poet tells us) in comparison with what might be told. As Dido listens with silent eyes and as what she leaves unsaid is far more eloquent than what she says, so Vergil speaks to us in this silent, eloquent fashion. Only the rarest powers of imagination and reflection and the most delicate sense of propriety could have guided him so unerringly in this practice.

We might wish that Tennyson had given further examples of the "lonely word", as they appeared to his poetic mind. Possibly some in the following collection may be classed with his solitary example. They are taken from Aeneid 1-6.

1.26. *repostum*. Vergil regularly uses *repono* in the sense of 'storing away'. I think the same meaning is present here. The judgment of Paris is stored away in Juno's mind; she clings to her grudge as something which has become dear to her. A neutral word with the mere sense of *hidden* would not have revealed so well her state of mind.

1.36. *servans* continues and confirms the idea of *repostum*. This grudge is something to be guarded, or "nursed", as Professor Fairclough well translates it. A word like *habeo* would have been quite inadequate.

1.209. *premit* does far more than a form of *pono* would have done. Without directly saying so, the poet shows us something of the struggle that goes on in his hero's heart.

1.418. *corripuere*. In their great eagerness to arrive at the queen's court they appeared to 'seize' the way. Compare Shakespeare's "He seemed in running to devour the way". Vergil seems deliberately to have chosen this word in preference to some neutral word.

1.719. *insidat* means 'rests upon', but it also suggests hostile intent, as in 2.616.

2.3. *renovare* depicts better than *narrare* would have done the horror of the struggle. The mere telling of the story is the renewing of the sorrow.

2.11. *breviter* suggests that all that may be said is brief in comparison with what must be left unsaid.

2.19. *penitus* is excellently descriptive (though indirectly so) of the great size of the horse.

2.42. *procul* portrays better even than the accompanying *ardens* the great eagerness of Laocoon.

2.51-53. *tremens* . . . *gemitum*. I believe the poet means to suggest that by these ominous tokens even the inanimate spear and horse are trying to warn the Trojans.

2.237. *scandit*. Though the walls have been levelled to the ground, the horse climbs, as a wolf leaping over the barrier into the sheepfold. Compare *salto* in 6.515. These two words suggest the hostile intent of the horse.